



*A TifEagle green at the Loblolly Pines GC displaying its unusual “leaf blade orientation.” Photo by Joel Jackson.*

## ULTRADWARFS AND SEASHORE PASPALUMS

# What Are We Learning?

I saw a quote recently: “The only thing worse than change is no change at all!” I guess there are a number of ways to interpret the meaning contained in the context of our topic. Here’s my two cents worth:

We have been on a steep curve of courses converting to ultradwarf grasses because of their tolerance to low mowing heights and better cold tolerance. The early converts of course had the most to learn in the shortest amount of time. One of the major justifications for switching was to plant a grass not as susceptible to mutation and off-type contamination as some of the older dwarf varieties. So with monostands in hand, it was off into the brave new world. It is not going to be easy to compare and contrast ultradwarf with seashore paspalum, so I won’t even try. Each grass has its special qualities and management needs. The point is to understand that when you

change grasses, you must also change methods. You will still mow, water, fertilize, verticut and aerify, but there will be changes in how you do those things and why you must do them differently.

In fact, the past couple of years, I’ve seen several courses opting to stay with dwarf and selecting a couple of varieties which have proven to be stable and not mutate. Contamination remains a real concern and your grass will only be as good as the diligence in the sod production fields... so stay with reliable companies with proven track records.

Some management standards with the new grasses are developing and, if you are switching, it would pay you dividends to call a neighboring superintendent who has been managing the same grass you are considering and who has similar soil, water source, pH issues, budget, member expectations, etc. I asked my friend Jim Walker to

interview some superintendents, and his article follows my interview with Geoff Coggan over at Isleworth G&CC. Geoff is new to TifEagle and here is what he found out when he took up ultradwarf management a little over a year ago.

Coggan said, “Thatch management is the number-one concern. Once out of control it affects everything for healthy plant growth from water penetration to the root to simple air/oxygen exchange. Thatch production is directly affected by your nutrient management program.”

So I asked Coggan how much nitrogen he was applying. He said, “I can’t give you a hard number right now. It’s only been a little more than a year. I can tell you it’s constantly changing as I learn the greens and get a handle on how each green performs. I can tell you we are on primarily a liquid program and apply more organic-based granulars. We have to manage our pH levels with acid injection into the system. I’d say when we settle down, it will be in the 8-to-10-pounds-per-year range.

“You constantly have to work this grass to keep it from getting so thick and dense that water can’t even penetrate. We do our heaviest renovation in the spring as early as

we can. Once we get past June, it takes much longer for the grass to recover if you really tear it up. We continuously run pencil tines and Hydroject aerification to keep it open for air and water.”

Geoff confirmed what I have learned so far, and what Rick Tatum so eloquently stated three years ago on ultradwarf management when he said, “Managing these new grasses takes a new approach that becomes prescription management. You can’t automatically do the same thing to all 18 greens anymore.”

*Joel Jackson*

## **South Florida Supers Welcome Challenge of Managing New Grasses**

*By Jim Walker, GCS*

Joel asked me for an interview article of a couple of South Florida superintendents about their ultradwarf- or paspalum-management programs. Armed with my guidelines, I take off across the Causeway and past the big hotels to see my pal Joe P. on Indian Creek Island and chat about his Mini-Verde, which was planted last summer.

First I want to congratulate Joe on receiving the Distinguished Service Award at the FGCSA Past Presidents dinner in May. It doesn’t seem possible that it has been 27 years since I sent him to the book store to buy Dr. James Beard’s *Science of Turf-grass* textbook.

Joe’s Tifdwarf greens have always been the best I ever played in South Florida, so why the change and what led you to pick Mini-verde?

“Three issues prompted our move to an ultradwarf: First, the existing greens were 11 years old and were showing signs of mutation. The organic matter buildup of the past 10 years was making it more difficult to maintain the Tifdwarf, and the competition of other

clubs switching to ultradwarfs dictated we go that direction.

“We picked Mini-Verde because the UTEP (University of Texas at El Paso) trials seemed to show it was the best grass, plus we had been running our own trials with TifEagle and didn’t like some of the things we saw.

“Our goal speed with Tifdwarf was 9 feet-plus, and now with the MiniVerde, it is 10.5-plus. We were mowing the dwarf at .125 in. and the MiniVerde is .100 to .110. We are using 25 to 50 percent less nitrogen with the new grass, vertical mowing more, rolling more, and top dressing more.

“On the top-dressing front, we have switched materials and installed a sand silo to store our material. It comes in dry, is kept dry in our silo and therefore has a better chance to penetrate the canopy of the Mini-Verde and get off the surface.

“We have an inboard/outboard irrigation system and the watering patterns for the new grass are similar to the old, with the exception of more hand watering on the new turf.

“We brought Earl Elsner in, who is a nationally recognized expert on ultradwarfs, to help us with our cultural-practice protocol and it was very interesting and most helpful. He felt since we were maintaining our Tifdwarf in a similar fashion to MiniVerde requirements, we did not need to change much.

His one word of advice was that most people with ultradwarfs do not top dress enough. I picked up another tip which has proven to be helpful from another South Florida superintendent who is managing Tif-Eagle, and that is to quad-tine once a month including the winter season with quarter-inch solid tines. Thanks, Mr. Sbarro.

“I am very happy with our decision to go with Mini-Verde. It is a more vigorous grass at the low heights of cut and provides a superior putting surface.”

OK, Joe. I guess that’ll have to do until we start playing the Super Heavy Duty Ultra Green Peach Fuzz being developed at a local laboratory run by this Doctor of Moon Dust from Outer

Space.

On the way back from Joe’s, I drive south on Old Cutler Road, and make a left turn at the big bend on 136th street to see Robert Wethy, who just re-opened Deering Bay Yacht and Country Club, now sporting a complete paspalum renovation. Course designer Arnold Palmer was on hand for the opening ceremony which Susi and I attended, and happily watched Mr. Palmer drive the first ball off number-one tee.

Now Rob, just a little background. Deering Bay used to be Kings Bay, which was designed and built by Mark Mahannah in 1959. In 1991, Arnold Palmer redesigned the course. It was planted with 419 tees, fairways and roughs, and had Tifdwarf greens. Why the change from that to paspalum?

“Our course is located directly on Biscayne Bay, and during the dry winter and spring months, turf quality would suffer. We were a perfect fit for paspalum. After much research, and test plots, SeaDwarf was chosen as the grass for our entire course.

“I have observed that our paspalum loves water and I have to be careful not to let things dry out.

“We use less nitrogen than we did with our Tifdwarf and more potassium and calcium. The new grass also loves micro-nutrients and uses them rapidly based on our tissue samples which are taken every two to three weeks.

“I have had no problem achieving the same green speed with paspalum as our bermuda. We had some disease pressure this winter, and found solid-tine aerification and top dressing every two to three weeks was a big help. When the weather warmed up, we sprayed Gibberellic acid on the greens and an immediate, positive response occurred.

“I am sure that managing the paspalum will continue to be a learning experience even more intense than what I faced before, and what we all face daily, managing the different types of grass on our courses in South Florida. Learning as we grow, and growing as we mow is all a part of the golf course management business that veteran superintendents come to love.”